

Accident of History

Chance assignment in graduate school leads to rewarding second career

by Abby Malik

Elizabeth A. Perkins '74, Davidson Associate Professor of History, has always wanted to live in a Paris apartment with a kitchen.

"You can walk to those food markets and then come home and cook so many things," she says with a smile. She and her husband, Ralph Schiefferle, both love to cook, particularly foreign cuisines.

"We've traveled to a lot of places, and then we come home and try to replicate the recipes of the ethnic and exotic foods we've had," she says.

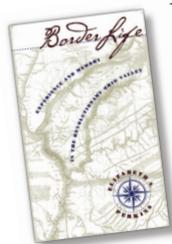
Now that she's retired after 19 years at Centre, they will have time to experiment in kitchens across the United States and the world. They are ready for more travel, which is hard to do during the academic year.

"We have a camping van, and we love to travel the back roads and live off the land," she says.

Or they might rent an apartment for a month in London, Japan, or Paris, or explore the Christmas markets in Germany and Austria in early December.

Perkins joined the Centre faculty in 1992, bringing a scholarly background in American and British history, particularly American cultural history. Her book *Border Life: Experience and Memory in the Revolutionary Ohio Valley* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998) earned praise for its insights into the "collective memory" of the ordinary men and women who settled Kentucky and southern Ohio. She is also co-author of *Frankfort: A Pictorial History* (with Stuart Sprague, Donning Company Publishers, 1980).

Although she served her turn in administration—as chair of the history program for five years and as associate dean from 1998 to 2001—she much prefers the classroom. She won the Kirk Award for excellence in teaching twice, in 1997 and 2007.



Liz Perkins '74 bids farewell to Jake Vollmer '11, a history major from Mount Sterling, Ky., at her final commencement in May.

Perkins says she stumbled into the teaching field by accident. After graduating from Centre in 1974, she had her sights set on the museum world and spent more than a decade as a curator at the Kentucky Historical Society in Frankfort. Then came a Ph.D. program at Northwestern University. During her second semester, she was given a section as a teaching assistant—and discovered she loved it.

"I also discovered that what I'd been doing in the museum field was teaching by another name," she says. "What I really like to do is learn stuff, then help other people explore it and understand it and discover the same things I have."

While Perkins was in Illinois for graduate school, her husband worked in Kentucky, and they commuted for three or four years.

"One of the great dilemmas for academic couples is keeping your marriage and job in the same state," she says. Happily for her, her alma mater had an opening in 1992 just as she was finishing her Ph.D.

"I, of course, love Centre, and it was a thrill to come to an institution where I knew students would be bright," she says.

One of the most important changes she's observed in her years teaching at Centre is an increase in diversity: racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and even geographic.

"When I was a student here in the early seventies, we actually had a fairly diverse student body," she says, noting that the student population was smaller than it is today.

"When I first came back [to teach at Centre], I was dismayed there wasn't as much diversity," she says.

But in the past few years, this has changed for a variety of reasons, she says, noting in particular the success of the Posse program, an innovative access and leadership program that brings 10 students from Boston to Centre each year.

"It's just terrific," she says. "It's also terrific for teaching history."

It's nearly impossible for Perkins to pinpoint just one favorite Centre memory. She treasures the times she co-directed the Centre-in-London program, in 2003 and 2009, for instance. But it's inside the classroom where she sees the real fruits of her labor.

"I've always believed really special things happen in classrooms," she says. "Oftentimes it's in class discussion that I feel *wow*, I have so much hope for future generations."



Abby Malik was media information coordinator at Centre for five years before leaving in May for a position at KET.